

Why do Catholics believe that Confirmation is a Sacrament?

By Graham Osborne

The Catholic Church teaches that Confirmation administered through the laying on of hands and anointing with Chrism oil, normally by a Bishop, “perfects Baptismal grace through a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit, as once granted to the apostles on the day of Pentecost” [CCC 1288-1316]. “It roots us more deeply in the divine filiation which makes us cry, “Abba! Father!” It unites us more firmly to Christ; it increases the gifts of the Holy Spirit in us; it renders our bond with the Church more perfect; it gives us a special strength of the Holy Spirit to spread and defend the faith by word and action as true witnesses of Christ, to confess the name of Christ boldly, and never to be ashamed of the Cross [CCC 1303].

But many Protestants object to the Catholic Sacrament of Confirmation, on various grounds, often claiming that the *word* is not even found in Scripture. But just because a word is not found in the Bible certainly does not mean that the teaching it represents is not there. The words Bible and Trinity are not found in Scripture, but no Christian would deny either.

Turning to Scripture, we see this sacrament clearly in places like Acts 8:14-17: “Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit; for it had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.”

Similarly, in Acts 19:2-6 St Paul asks several believers: "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" And they said, "No, we have never even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." And he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They said, "Into John's baptism." And Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus." On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them; and they spoke with tongues and prophesied.

In both cases, we unequivocally see a separation between Baptism and the laying on of hands, the latter accompanied by a greater outpouring of the Holy Spirit and his gifts.

And the testimony from the early Church is equally clear. For example, in 253 AD, St Cyprian writes that, "It is necessary for him that has been baptized also to be anointed, so that by his having received chrism, that is, the anointing, he can be the anointed of God and have in him the grace of Christ" (Letters 7:2 [A.D. 253]).

And in St Hippolytus' "The Apostolic Tradition" [215 AD], he details confirmation with equal clarity: "Then, pouring the consecrated oil into his hand and imposing it on the head of the baptized, he shall say, 'I anoint you with holy oil in the Lord, the Father Almighty, and Christ Jesus and the Holy Spirit.'

But let me add an interesting side note. For roughly the first 500 years of the Church, Confirmation and First Communion both *immediately* followed Baptism, and in that order, whether the Sacraments were being administered to an infant or an adult [we still maintain this order with adults going through the RCIA process today]. The minister of all three sacraments was typically the Bishop.

But as the Church grew, it was not possible for the bishop to be at every baptism, so two traditions developed. The western Church preserved the minister of Confirmation as the Bishop, but the timing of Confirmation and First Communion eventually went from immediately after baptism to a later date. In contrast, the eastern Church has preserved the timing and order of Confirmation [reception as infants and immediately before reception of the Eucharist], but the minister is typically the baptizing priest.

The other change, and perhaps the most significant, is that in many places, the *order* of Confirmation has

changed. Many dioceses confirm *after* receipt of the Eucharist, roughly around grade 7, or in high school in many places in the US.

How did this change come about? The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops [CCCCB] relates that, “in 1910 Pope Pius X recognized that children were not being allowed First Communion until the age of twelve to fourteen. He felt that such a denial was contrary to the vision of Jesus who always drew children to himself. Pius X ordered that children be allowed to come to the table of the Eucharist as soon as they could distinguish the Eucharist from ordinary bread. The age [of receiving the Eucharist] was then lowered to around seven.”

But from what I can tell, St Pius X did *not* institute a change in the age of Confirmation, or in the *order* of the reception of the Sacraments of Initiation. Yet in many areas in North America, and elsewhere, change they did!

So this change might be problematic in two ways.

First, as I mentioned earlier, these 3 sacraments were usually received together as infants in the first centuries of the Church. Today, the Catechism calls for the age of confirmation to be the age of reason [roughly age 7, unless grave reason requires earlier], though Canon Law allows a conference of Bishops to change this [CIC 891]. Based on that, perhaps children should be confirmed earlier than we see today.

But many people are actually advocating for confirmation to be moved even *later*, their reasoning often being that Confirmation seems to not be “working”. Numerous pastors and teachers have noted that many teens leave our parishes shortly after receiving Confirmation. So a later confirmation age might mean that we could “keep” and teach young people longer – not a bad thing in itself.

But statistics for young Catholics leaving [or losing] the faith are disturbing to say the least, and the timing of this decision is shocking -many as early as age 9, but averaging around 13 according to a recent Georgetown University study! Would they have benefitted and been strengthened spiritually from receiving the Sacrament of Confirmation at an earlier age, maybe 7 or even earlier?

There may be wisdom in the ancient discipline of the Church confirming at an earlier age. Recall that in Luke 18:15-16 when “people were bringing even infants to him”, Jesus said, “Let the children come to me and do not prevent them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these”. The Greek word used for infants here was “brephos”, which literally means newborn or small baby. Jesus then, “blessed them, placing his hands on them”, maybe even foreshadowing the laying on of hands used in the administering of Confirmation.

Secondly, Confirmation is supposed to *precede* the reception of the Eucharist, and this according to Vatican II, the Catechism, and the revised Rite of Confirmation. And as mentioned, it was also the traditional order of these sacraments for the first 500 years of the Church.

For example, Vatican II’s *Lumen Gentium* specifies the complimentary order in which the sacraments are to be received: “Incorporated into the Church through baptism... bound more intimately to the Church by the sacrament of confirmation... [then] taking part in the Eucharistic sacrifice... the fount and apex of the whole Christian life” (no. 11).”

The CCCC’s document, “The Order of the Sacraments of Initiation”, reiterates this theology. It notes that “the teaching of the Second Vatican Council and subsequent teaching of the Magisterium lead to several conclusions about the nature of confirmation and its relation to the other initiation sacraments: namely, that confirmation is a sacrament of initiation, and that it is to be celebrated after baptism and in preparation for the celebration of the Eucharist... Confirmation is always spoken of as completing baptism and preparing for the Eucharist... the Eucharist is always spoken of as the climax, the completion of initiation into the Christian community.”

We also see this sacramental order prefigured in the baptism of Jesus in Matthew 3:16, where the Holy Spirit came down on Jesus immediately *after* he came up from the waters of baptism.

This document then goes on to stress that: “confirmation is never spoken of as a sacrament of ‘adult’ commitment to faith, but always as a sacrament of initiation”. This is a very different focus from most current Confirmation preparation programs, in North America at least.

With stats saying that upwards of 80% of Catholics doubt the Real Presence of the Eucharist, I can’t help but wonder whether the graces and the gifts received in Confirmation might help children prepare for the reception of the Eucharist, particularly in helping seal a faith in the Real Presence.

But some might rightfully ask: when children are confirmed at younger ages [even infants], how are they to make an adult commitment of faith? Bishop Olmstead [Phoenix Diocese], answers this well: “All sacraments are a gift from our Heavenly Father... [they] are not earned or merited... An authentic mature commitment to Christ and the Church is expressed in full participation in the Eucharist and apostolic life of the Church. It is not achieved at a single moment but throughout the life-long deepening of our relationship with Christ. This begins in childhood and continues until death”.

Some contend that if we confirm children at an early age, young people may not come to catechism classes after that at all. This is a valid concern, and has actually happened in some places. But we shouldn’t need to force young people into going to catechism classes, and such classes should not seem like just another academic class to take. That is not the ideal way for young people to grow in their faith.

The first and best place for evangelization, sacramental preparation and catechesis is the family. What we should focus on is helping parents teach and share the faith with their children. Any other sacramental preparation or follow up should be aimed at augmenting what has been done naturally in the family. If evangelization and catechesis is done well in the family, children will naturally grow up with a strong and living faith that will serve them well into adulthood.

If we must hold the sacraments over people as an obligation, literally forcing them to bring their children to religious education classes to get a piece of paper, then perhaps we need to totally rethink what we are doing – and how we are doing it. God is the “one thing” that matters: “seek first the Kingdom...” But people must come to this realization on their own to some degree. They can’t be forced into it.

Confirmation, whether conferred as an infant or older, is simply one of the great gifts of preparation given to us by God that will aid a commitment to Jesus that will grow and last a lifetime. We can never underestimate the power of grace freely given in the sacraments, whether that sacrament is administered as a young babe or adult. Perhaps we are putting too much faith in preparation programs, and maybe lacking faith in God’s power to do exactly what he has promised to do when these sacraments are faithfully administered, and then nurtured in the family.

For centuries, the Church, confirmed infants – and Confirmation always followed Baptism, but *preceded* First Communion. Perhaps we should revisit this ancient tradition, and reevaluate our current practices in light of this: “Let the little children come to me, and do not prevent them...”